SPECIAL FEATURE #3-1336 MARCH 17, 1978
LINDA CASHDAN

THE KERNER COMMISSION REPORT: TEN YEARS LATER

ANNCR: "OUR NATION IS MOVING TOWARD TWO SOCIETIES, ONE BLACK, ONE WHITE, SEPARATE AND UNEQUAL." THIS WAS THE OMINOUS WARNING OF A NATIONAL PANEL, CALLED UPON TEN YEARS AGO TO ASSESS RACIAL PROBLEMS IN THE UNITED STATES. WAS THE STARK WARNING CORRECT? LINDA CASHDAN TAKES A LOOK AT THE KERNER COMMISSION REPORT, TEN YEARS LATER:

VOICE: DURING THE SUMMER OF 1967 -- THE "LONG HOT SUMMER" OF 1967 -- BLACK YOUTHS SET FIRES, LOOTED, OR WAGED BATTLE WITH THE POLICE IN SOME FORTY CITIES ACROSS THE UNITED STATES. IN JULY, AS FIRES WERE BLAZING IN THE MIDWESTERN CITY OF DETROIT, PRESIDENT LYNDON B. JOHNSON APPOINTED A NATIONAL ADVISORY COMMISION ON CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE, WHICH BECAME KNOWN LATER AS THE "KERNER COMMISSION," AFTER ITS CHAIRMAN, FORMER ILLINOIS GOVERNOR OTTO KERNER. THE PANEL'S MISSION: TO FIND OUT WHAT WAS HAPPENING AND WHY.

TAPE: CUT ONE -- GINZBURG:

"THE FUNDAMENTAL DILEMMA THAT THE COMMISSION FACED WAS: SHOUL WE CALL THE SHOTS AS WE SAW THEM? SHOULD WE TELL THE TRUTH? SHOULD WE ACTUALLY SAY WHAT WE THOUGHT WAS NEEDED, OR, ALTERNATIVELY, SHOULD WE SOMEHOW SHADE THE RECOMMENDATIONS IN SUCH A WAY AS TO MAKE THEM MORE POLITICALLY ACCEPTABLE?"

VOICE: THIS IS DAVID GINZBURG, AN ATTORNEY WHO SERVED AS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE KERNER COMMISSION.

TAPE: CUT TWO -- GINZBURG:

"WE CHOSE TO TELL THE TRUTH. WE CHOSE TO CREATE A YARDSTICK BY WHICH OUR POLITICAL DEFICIENCIES COULD BE MEASURED. WE DID THIS, AND IN RETROSPECT, I'M GLAD WE DID THIS."

VOICE: THE KERNER COMMISSION REPORT, ISSUED IN MARCH, 1968, BLAMMED THE PREVALENT PATTERN OF "WHITE RACISM" FOR THE CIVIL DISORDERS, AND IT SAID THAT ONLY GOVERNMENT ACTION ON AN "UNPRECEDENTED SCALE" COULD HALT THE PROBLEM.

IT WAS HONEST, BUT THE TIMING COULD NOT HAVE BEEN WORSE. THE REPORT WAS RELEASED JUST AFTER THE TET OFFENSIVE IN VIETNAM, AND JUST BEFORE THE ASSASSINATIONS OF MARTIN LUTHER KING AND ROBERT KENNEDY, AND THE MASSIVE STUDENT DEMONSTRATIONS IN THE STREETS OF CHICAGO DURING THE DEMOCRATS NATIONAL CONVENTION IN THE SUMMER OF 1968. CONCEIVED IN TURBULENCE, THE KERNER COMMISSION REPORT WAS BURIED BY EVEN GREATER TURBULENCE. IT WAS READ AND DISCUSSED -- INDEED, MORE THAN TWO MILLION COPIES OF THE REPORT HAVE BEEN SOLD -- BUT ITS SUGGESTIONS WERE IGNORED.

AND ITS WARNING?

TAPE: CUT THREE -- BROOKE:

"THE KERNER COMMISSION SAID AT THE TIME THAT THIS NATION WAS BECOMING A NATION OF TWO SOCIETIES: SEPARATE AND UNEQUAL, ONE BLACK, ONE WHITE."

VOICE: SENATOR EDWARD BROOKE, ONE OF THE TWO BLACK MEMBERS OF THE KERNER COMMISSION...

TAPE: CUT FOUR -- BROOKE:

"BASICALLY, WE RECOMMENDED THAT WE ADDRESS THE PROBLEMS OF THE INNER CITIES AND THAT WE ADOPT A NATIONAL POLICY OF INTEGRATING THIS COUNTRY. SADLY, TEN YEARS LATER, NEITHER OF THOSE GOALS HAVE (HAS) BEEN REALIZED."

VOICE: REALIZED? NO. BUT THERE HAS BEEN STEADY PROGRESS TOWARD THE GOAL OF INTEGRATION. AND THIS PROGRESS HAS CREATED A SITUATION THE KERNER COMMISSION DID NOT PREDICT: BLACKS IN THE UNITED STATES ARE MOVING INTO TWO GROUPS, SEPARATE AND UNEQUAL, ONE MIDDLE CLASS. THE OTHER POOR.

TAPE: CUT FIVE -- BROOKE:

"THOUGH WE HAVE BLACKS ON CORPORATE BOARDS, MORE VISIBLE BLACKS IN BUSINESS THAN EVER BEFORE, MORE BLACKS LIVING IN MORE EXPENSIVE HOUSING THAN EVER BEFORE, THE FACT REMAINS THAT FOR THE MASSES OF BLACK PEOPLE IN THIS COUNTRY, WE HAVE NOT MADE PROGRESS."

VOICE: IN 1968, 2% OF ALL BLACK FAMILIES EARNED $15,000 A YEAR. TODAY 30% DO. AND THEY ARE MAKING IT IN THE ECONOMIC MAINSTREAM. IN 1968 MIDDLE AND UPPER CLASS BLACKS MADE THEIR MONEY BY SERVING THE BLACK COMMUNITY ITSELF, AS DOCTORS, LAWYERS, UNDERTAKERS, AND TEACHERS. TODAY THEY ARE MAKING THEIR MONEY IN THE WHITE WORLD TOO, AS CORPORATE EXECUTIVES... AS SKILLED UNION CRAFTSMEN. THE RATE OF UNEMPLOYMENT AMONG INNER CITY POOR BLACKS HAS NEVER BEEN HIGHER, BUT, AT THE SAME TIME, MANY OF THE "INNER CITY POOR" OF A DECADE AGO HAVE MOVED UP THE ECONOMIC LADDER TO BETTER NEIGHBORHOODS, AIDED BY LAWS THAT OUTLAWED DISCRIMINATION AND WHICH INDIRECTLY, INCREASED RACIAL TOLERANCE. WHITE AMERICANS ARE FAR MORE WILLING TO ACCEPT BLACKS AS FRIENDS AND NEIGHBORS THAN THEY WERE TEN YEARS AGO. BLACK FACES HAVE BLENDED IN WITH THE WHITE WORLD TO A LARGE DEGREE. ... ON TELEVISION, IN COLLEGE YEAR BOOKS, AND ON ELECTION POSTERS.

TAPE: CUT SIX -- BROOKE:

"IN THOSE DAYS (TEN YEARS AGO) WE HAD 500 ELECTED BLACK OFFICIALS. TODAY WE HAVE SOME FOUR THOUSAND PLUS BLACK ELECTED OFFICIALS."

VOICE: INDEED, THE NUMBER OF BLACKS IN CONGRESS HAS DOUBLED SINCE '68. THE NUMBER OF BLACK STATE SENATORS HAS INCREASED 81%. THERE WERE LESS THAN FIFTY BLACK MAYORS THEN, TODAY THERE ARE 163, INCLUDING THE MAYORS OF SUCH LARGE CITIES AS LOS ANGELES, DETROIT, WASHINGTON, D.C., ATLANTA, AND NEWARK. IT IS ALL A RESULT OF THE VOTING RIGHTS ACT OF 1965, WHICH REMOVED THE BARRIERS THAT PREVENTED BLACKS FROM VOTING. AS A RESULT, THE NUMBERS OF BLACK VOTERS MULTIPLIED. AND, AS VICE PRESIDENT MONDALE POINTS OUT, IN POLITICS, THERE IS POWER IN NUMBERS --

TAPE: CUT SEVEN -- MONDALE:

"I HAVE MET... WELL, LET ME PUT IT THIS WAY: I'VE MET A LOT OF DUMB POLITICIANS IN MY LIFE. BUT I NEVER MET A SUCCESSFUL ONE WHO COULDN'T COUNT! (LAUGHTER)"

VOICE: IN THE 1976 ELECTION, THE COUNT WAS SIX MILLION BLACK VOTERS, AND MANY POLITICIAN COUNTED. INDEED, SOMETHING PECULIAR IS HAPPENING IN THE SOUTHERN UNITED STATES THESE DAYS. YESTERDAY'S ARCH-SEGREGATIONISTS--MEN WHO WERE ELECTED LARGELY BECAUSE OF THEIR OPPOSITION TO RACIAL EQUALITY -- ARE NOW ACTIVELY RECRUITING THE BLACK VOTE. THEY WANT TO BE REELECTED, AND THEY HAVE LOOKED AT THE NUMBERS.

OTHER NUMBERS, HOWEVER, TELL A DIFFERENT STORY. THEY TELL THE STORY OF THE BLACKS LEFT BEHIND, THE "MASSES" AS SENATOR BROOKE CALLED THEM, WHO REMAIN IN THE CITY GHETTOS. THERE ARE SOME CITIES WHERE THE UNEMPLOYMENT RATE FOR BLACK YOUTHS

VOICE: (CONT'D) IS HIGHER THAN FORTY PER CENT. THEY HAVE LOST THEIR HATRED, THE HOSTITLITY THAT SPURRED THEM ON TO VIOLENCE IN 1968. BUT, SOME FEEL, THEY HAVE LOST THEIR HOPE TOO. AGAIN, VICE PRESIDENT MONDALE:

TAPE: CUT EIGHT -- MONDALE:

"THERE'S MUCH THAT NEEDS TO BE DONE. WE HAVE MADE A BEGINNING WE HAVE PASSED A YOUTH EMPLOYMENT BILL, SPECIAL PROGRAMS TO GO TO THE YOUNG PEOPLE OF THIS COUNTRY AND PARTICULARLY THE MINORITY YOUTH WHO ARE STANDING AROUND THE CENTER CITIES OF THIS COUNTRY BY THE HUNDREDS AND THOUSANDS, WEEK AFTER WEEK, AND MONTH AFTER MONTH AND YEAR AFTER YEAR, UTTERLY DESTROYING ANY SENSE OF SELF-WORTH OR HOPE."

VOICE: TREMENDOUS PROGRESS HAS BEEN MADE OVER THE LAST TEN YEARS, THE VICE PRESIDENT SAYS, BUT ALTHOUGH RACISM HAS BEEN OUTLAWED, MANY OF ITS ECONOMIC RESULTS REMAIN:

TAPE: CUT NINE -- MONDALE:

"WE CANNOT ESCAPE THE TRUTH THAT A GHETTO LOOKS NO DIFFERENT FROM THE FRONT OF THE BUS. WE NEED TO HAVENOT ONLY JUSTICE IN LAW. BUT IN LIFE, AND THIS REQUIRES A CONTINUING, ALL-OUT UNREMITTING POLICY OF FULL EMPLOYMENT IN THIS COUNTRY."

VOICE: IT ALL ADDS UP TO A VERY COMPLICATED STATUS REPORT. ONE SET OF STATISTICS SHOWS BLACK AMERICANS RISING. ANOTHER SHOWS BLACK AMERICANS DROWNING IN POVERTY. IN EVERY SET OF TABLES -- EDUCATION, INCOME, POLITICS -- THE NUMBERS SHOW "MORE", AND "MORE THAN EVER BEFORE." BUT THEY ALSO SHOW THAT THE "MORE" IS STILL NOT ENOUGH.

AS ONE BLACK LEADER PUT IT, "YOUR POINT OF VIEW DEPENDS ON WHERE YOU STAND. SOME SAY, 'WONDERFUL! THE GLASS HAS BECOME HALF FULL!' OTHERS LOOK AT THE SAME GLASS, SHAKE THEIR

VOICE: HEADS DESPAIRINGLY AND SAY... 'TEN YEARS SINCE THE KERNER
(CONT'D)
COMMISSION REPORT THE GLASS IS STILL HALF EMPTY.'"

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